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Tunisia

"Ben Ali assassin, Sarkozy accomplice"

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Tunisia's President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali has stepped down after 23 years in power, amid widespread protests on the streets of the capital Tunis. In a televised address, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi said he would be taking over from the president. A state of emergency was declared earlier, as weeks of protests over economic issues snowballed into rallies against Mr Ben Ali's rule. Unconfirmed reports say Mr Ben Ali and his family have left Tunisia. The reports suggest that the deposed president is looking for a place of asylum, with French media saying that French President Nicolas Sarkozy has turned down a request for his plane to land in France. (BBC, Friday 14th January, 2011)

(The following NPA statement was made before Ben Ali fled.)

January 11, 2011 – When Mohamed Bouazizi committed suicide by setting fire to himself after being harassed by the police his act became the spark which is now setting fire to the whole of the “miraculous Tunisia” of General Ben Ali.

In every town, large and small all over the country, demonstrations showed that the people have had enough. First of all the unemployed and semi-employed moved into action, then they were joined by the workers – unionised workers, but also other groups such as lawyers. The revolt then spread to university students and high school students back from the winter break. This massive wave of struggle has exploded under the slogans of “the right to work”, “the right to a fair share of the nation’s wealth” and “the fight against corruption and nepotism” (this last is a gangrene which has spread to all levels of society). The demonstrators smashed up the symbols of the party-state. The national leadership of the sole legal trade union confederation, the UGTT, which denounced the movement at the beginning (unlike some of its local and regional bodies) was finally obliged to give its official support.

What is immediately striking about these mobilisations, mostly involving the “Ben Ali Generation” (Ben Ali has been ruling the country with an iron fist for 23 years) is their skill in harassing a regime that is expert in stifling the smallest spaces available for free speech.

As they did in Iran, web surfers have been able to set up conduits for information and details of actions by using proxies which the web police cannot censor. The police forces, even though there are 130,000 of them, have been overwhelmed and have called on the army to back them up in several towns.

The night of January 8-9 was particularly bloody. Dozens of people were shot dead at Gasserine, Tala and Mekkassi. But murder, arrests, provocations and intimidation have not demoralised the demonstrators, who clearly named from the beginning the people responsible for their misery: Ben Ali and his family mafia.

The Ben Ali regime caught in a whirlwind

The world capitalist crisis has hit a country which had opened up practically the whole of its economy through deregulation and privatisation. This has shown clearly the contradictions of the corrupt dealings known as the “Tunisian miracle” which, according to its apostles, was to hoist Tunisia up into the ranks of the “emerging economies”. The official growth rate has fallen by half since 2008. The pharaonic projects to transform whole sections of Tunisia’s coastline into a series of theme parks have all collapsed under the financial crisis hitting the Gulf

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states which were to have injected their dollars in this huge real-estate speculation.

While Ben Ali thought he was one of the good pupils of the Western powers, busy doing away with islamism, trade unionism and immigration, the United States government now says it is "concerned" by the situation. They say they are "following the situation closely" and all of a sudden they believe that democracy in Tunisia is a concern of theirs.

These raised eyebrows won't be enough to satisfy a movement, which is affirming ever more strongly its desire to rid itself of a hated regime. Tunisians must count on the support of other peoples and not on the states which have always been accomplices of the dictatorship.

Many demonstrations have been organised in support of the movement, both in other Arab countries, and in the main countries with large numbers of Tunisian immigrants. In France, there have been rallies in Paris, Toulouse, Nantes, Lyon, Marseille and Lille. These rallies have brought together the Tunisian community, as well as activists from the Arab world and from the French left. They have denounced the dictatorship of Ben Ali and the complicity of Sarkozy. On these demonstrations could be seen many new faces, on the streets in protest for the first time. The Tunisian consuls and Ben Ali's secret agents, who are usually around to harass the opposition, are nowhere to be seen. This is an unmistakable sign that change is in the air.

The crisis hitting the countries on the northern shores of the Mediterranean is the same one which is destabilising the countries of the southern shores of the same sea. This is one more reason that solidarity is essential. We must not relax the pressure, and our first demand must be the freeing of all the activists in prison.

Translated by John Mullen for *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*